

Promoting visibility to fight vulnerability: the experience of the National Survey on Homeless Persons - Brazil, 2008

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Short Abstract:

This paper analyses the methodological procedures taken by Brazilian Government to carry out the first national level initiative to count and describe homeless people. The National Survey on Homeless Persons conducted in 2007/8 identified 31,922 adults in 71 municipalities. I discuss methodological aspects of measurement of this group, such as the difficulty of definition of the universe (concept), the preparation of instruments, and the procedures to avoid double counting. Also, I emphasize the political aspects of the survey since it integrates a governmental response to the demand for visibility claimed by HP and HP entities. As part of this response, methodological decisions were made into having HP/HP entities accompanying all steps of the survey, a very rich experience but also very demanding. What are the strengths/limitations that this social control introduces to the elaboration and results of such a research? Promoting participation in the process of data collection is itself an emancipation strategy for the group?

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Extended Abstract:

DESCRIPTION OF THE TOPIC TO BE STUDIED

In this paper I describe the methodological and political effort of Brazilian Government in carrying out the first National Survey on Homeless Persons². Methodologically, emphasis will be given in the steps of preparation of field research to the 2007/8 survey. Politically, my focus is on the acting of the entities that represent homeless people (HP) and on their role in pressuring government in order to enforce HP's rights and to strengthen their visibility.

The interrelation between the two aspects – methodological and political – is an important element of this survey. The National Survey on Homeless Persons is the first research of national scope carried out on this subject in Brazil. It is a result of the demand for visibility made by HP organizations. 'Visibility' as claimed by these groups includes the ability to answer 'how many they are?', 'who are they?', and 'how do they live?'³. 'They', in this sense, refers to homeless people of 18 years-old or above⁴.

According to the concept in use by the National Secretariat for Social Assistance, "homeless persons are a heterogeneous group mainly characterized by the extreme poverty, the lack or fragility of family ties, and the lack of conventional housing. These people are driven to dwell in public places such as streets and abandoned buildings. Eventually, they might spend the nights in shelters or lodges". The comprehensiveness of this definition had to be considered in the definition of the methodology used in the National Survey. Also, it was in consideration that the research findings should give substrate to an eventual revision of the definition.

From the elaboration of the questionnaires to the work in data collection, a specificity of this survey is that HP and HP entities took part in almost all steps of it. In this case, by HP I refer to homeless people who are getting organized into the MNPR⁵ (National Movement of Homeless Persons), and by HP entities I refer to NGOs working in the field. This extensive participation was an agreement between government and HP/HP entities willing to guarantee the quality and confidence of data, and to stimulate social emancipation and political networking of HP.

² *Pesquisa Nacional sobre a População em Situação de Rua.*

³ Through Brazilian census it is possible to identify individuals who live in inadequate housing as far as they have an regular physical address; however, Brazilian censuses do not include nondomiciliated individuals. Therefore the real demand for visibility made by HP and HP entities is the inclusion of people who 'live' on streets and/or shelters in the demographical census.

⁴ Legal majority, in Brazil, correspond to the age of 18 years-old. A large number of Brazilian children and adolescents live or work on streets. However, this phenomenon tends to be different than that of homeless adults. Roughly, the difference refers to the fact that adults are 'more permanent' in this condition than children. More often than not, children and adolescents will be on streets for shorter periods (frequently more than once). Despite being a highly important public of social assistance, methodologically, the specifics of children and adolescents on streets justify Brazilian Governments option not to consider them on the same survey as adults. It is important to notice that the historical claim for visibility and quantification made by HP entities refers to adult population. According to those entities research and social assistance initiatives for children and adolescents are far more frequent than for homeless adults.

⁵ *Movimento Nacional de População de Rua.*

This paper aims at analyzing the strengths and difficulties of carrying out a survey in a context somehow configured as an embattled terrain. On one hand I expose the methodological steps and decisions government made to reach this hard-to-count population, on the other hand I analyze the political challenge of taking advantage of the huge contributions of HP/HP entities at the same time that they are growing into a stronger political participation which implies pressuring for governmental actions⁶.

THE NATIONAL SURVEY ON HOMELESS PERSONS

The National Survey on Homeless Persons was carried out in 71 Brazilian municipalities. Out of this total, 23 are Capital cities of their states and 48 cities were selected for having population equal or higher to 300 thousand⁷. Four out of the 27 Brazilian Capital cities were not surveyed because they already had municipal initiatives of the same purpose: São Paulo, Belo Horizonte, Recife, and Porto Alegre. The survey identified 31.922 adult homeless persons.

Three main sessions integrate the survey process: preparation to field, field work, and findings and dissemination.

Preparation to Field

An important step in the preparation to field was in the identification of the universe to be surveyed. On one hand it was already a decision not to investigate children and adolescent by this time. On the other hand, the HP definition in use by the National Secretariat for Social Assistance combines housing, economical, and familiar aspects what puts a lot of difficulties to measurement. How should extreme poverty be defined? How should the fragility of family ties be measured? What should be considered conventional housing?

After an intense process of discussion among different levels of government, specialists, and HP/HP entities, it was decided that the filter to the universe should be that of the general place of spending the nights. Only individuals who reported they generally spend the nights on streets and/or shelters were considered for this research. This decision excluded all those who live in inadequate housing, but spend most nights in this housing, and any other circumstance that makes a person not spend most nights on streets or shelters.

‘Street’ and ‘shelter’ were also situations that had to be defined. Street situation included most outdoor sleeping in public spaces or abandoned buildings, and excluded more structured camping situations such as long-term occupation of abandoned buildings or areas. ‘Shelters’ were considered as short-term institutions available free of costs,

⁶ As part of my duties as a monitoring and evaluation coordinator at the Ministry of Social Development in Brazil I coordinated the execution of this survey. Therefore, through this paper I try an “insider-outsider” experience in the sense that I intend not only to describe the richness of the methodological aspects involved in the survey. Also, I intend to do a substantive evaluation of the participation of HP/HP in the process trying to identify how they appropriate of the process and results of the survey in their claim for visibility.

⁷ According to the population estimates of 2004, this National Survey was carried out in all 300.000 + Brazilian cities. Only two out the 71 surveyed cities had population smaller than 300 thousand, but they are Capital cities.

generally managed by local governments, NGOs, and religious organizations. Most shelters only offer night lodge and allow a maximum every night lodging of six months per person.

Once that decision was made, in the intense effort of mapping HP in all 71 cities both streets and shelters had to be mapped. Mapping was conducted carefully and prepared to represent the configuration of cities by night, as it was a decision to conduct field work by night. Adequate mapping was important to estimate the number of interviewers that would be necessary to carry out field work.

Because the aim of the investigation surpassed the quantification of HP, two questionnaires, of different lengths, were elaborated to the interviews. A 'short questionnaire' of 19 questions collected sociodemographical data and information on why and how long interviewees were in the streets/shelters. The 'long questionnaire' of 62 questions was prepared to interview approximately 10% of sample and, besides the content of the short one, included questions about family ties, access to health, education and social assistance services, and migration.

HP/HP entities and specialists in the field joined several workshops for discussion and validation of the content of questionnaires.

Field Work

The survey identified 31,922 adult persons who reported that they generally sleep in the streets or shelters. Field work was conducted from October 2007 to January 2008, from Mondays to Thursdays, and on average from 8 p.m. to 1 a.m. Weekends were avoided just as rainy nights and holydays. On average, every 25 cities were surveyed simultaneously and field work last from 1 to 3 weeks depending on the size of the city.

Refusal rate was 13.3% (4,275 individuals). This low refusal rate might be an indicator of the success of the preparation of field work, specially the participation of HP/HP entities in field research. Many groups of interviewers were accompanied by HP who facilitated the approach to interviewees and to find hiding places HP might use as 'safe shelters'⁸.

The 'short interview' was conducted with 90% of the universe. A sample of approximately 10% of interviewees responded to the 'long questionnaire'.

In sum 1,479 people enrolled in field work activities. Around 20% of those were HP or members of HP entities. This percentage of participants was considered to be low by HP/HP entities and it was a reason for complains.

Some Findings

Results of the National Survey on Homeless Persons were released in April 2008. According to general findings the majority of HP is man (82%), 18-44 years-old (60%), and afro descendant (67%).

More than 70% of interviewees mentioned more than one reason to be in streets. Most prevalent causes were alcohol/drugs (35.5%), unemployment (29.8%), and family estrangement (29.1%).

⁸ It is a common practice among HP who spleep on streets to find shelter in hiding places such as the sewerage system.

Preference of outside sleeping rather than in shelters was reported by 46.5% of interviewees (43.8% prefer shelters). However, most of them generally sleep on streets (69.6%) what may imply lack of spots in shelters.

DATA AND RESEARCH METHODS FOR THIS PAPER

Data for this paper are all reports produced in the process of elaboration of the National Survey. Results of the research in 71 municipalities will be described despite my focus is not on these results, but on the process. I will conduct in-depth interviews with some central HP representatives and HP entities, notably those of MNPR and of catholic leagues working in this field. The purpose of these in-depth interviews is to further analyze the political aspect and in order to get subsidies to the analysis on promotion of visibility vs. decrease in vulnerability.

Partial References:

Executive Summary of the National Survey on Homeless Persons. MDS, META, April, 2008. Available at www.mds.gov.br/sagi

Concept Note 'Methodological aspects of the National Survey on Homeless Persons'. MDS, May 2008. Available at www.mds.gov.br/sagi